

Hundreds of international doctors due to start medical residencies are in visa limbo

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A week before they are due to start work at U.S. hospitals, hundreds of doctors from abroad are still waiting to obtain visas granting them temporary stays in the country.

Many of them have been in limbo since late May, when the State Department suspended applications for J-1 visas, which allow people to come to the U.S. for exchange visitor programs. The visas are the most common way for international doctors to attend residencies in the U.S., which provide medical graduates with training in a given specialty.

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The State Department announced last week that embassies or consulates could resume visa interviews but that applicants would be required to make their social media accounts public.

However, many doctors still haven't been able to schedule visa appointments because their embassies haven't reopened slots, according to Project IMG, a networking and support group for international medical students and graduates. Others have been told at visa appointments over the last several days that their applications require additional vetting.

Still others have been denied visas because they are originally from countries listed on the Trump administration's recent travel ban. The administration this month partially restricted visas for people from seven countries and fully suspended visas for an additional 12 countries.

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NBC News spoke with eight doctors who have struggled to obtain visas ahead of their residencies, most of whom asked to remain anonymous for fear of affecting their visa application process. They said their dreams are now up in the air after years of studying, financial sacrifice and lost time with loved ones. The cost of medical licensing exams, which anyone starting a medical residency in the U.S. is required to pass, can exceed \$2,000. They also worry about the communities they're supposed to serve in the U.S., many of which have doctor shortages and rely on incoming medical residents to fill those gaps.

Several doctors said they are frantically refreshing embassy pages in hopes that an appointment opens up or looking for slots in nearby countries. Others who have been denied visas are trying to schedule new appointments, but are starting to lose hope.

"Sometimes I want to give up, to be honest," said one doctor, originally from a travel ban country, who was accepted to a pediatric residency in rural Texas. "I'm tired. I have studied a lot. I have spent a lot of money."

More than 6,600 doctors who are non-U.S. citizens were accepted into residency programs this year, according to the National Resident Matching Program. Once they're matched with a program, these doctors have a brief window — around three months — to obtain a visa before their residencies start on July 1. Many international doctors were able to schedule interviews and obtain visas before the Trump administration's visa pause, according to Project IMG. But others were still waiting on documents from their government to complete their applications or couldn't get an interview until June.

Project IMG said Tuesday it estimates that hundreds of doctors are still stuck abroad due to the Trump administration's visa restrictions.

"We gotta solve this crisis by July 1," said Dr. Sebastian Arruarana, the organization's founder.

Many residency programs are doing their best to reserve people's spots while the visa process plays out, but it's not a guarantee. While programs can't revoke a spot outright, they can apply for a waiver with the National Resident Matching Program that would release them of their commitment to a doctor. They can also defer a doctor's spot to the following year.

A spokesperson for the State Department told NBC News last Friday that protecting national security is the highest priority in the visa process. However, they noted that "visas for qualified medical professionals have played an important role in helping the United States address critical health care shortages."

Many hospitals are indeed counting on incoming residents to address provider shortages, particularly in rural or low-income areas.

Dr. Artur Polechshuk and Dr. Kseniia Tonkoshkurova, an engaged couple from Novi Sad, Serbia, were matched into a pediatric residency at a hospital in Kanawha County, West Virginia. The county is designated by the federal government as a medically underserved area with a shortage of primary care providers. Out of nine first-year residents in the couple's program, three were held up by the J-1 visa suspension, Tonkoshkurova said.



Dr. Kseniia Tonkoshkurova and Dr. Artur Polechshuk, both pediatricians living in Serbia. Courtesy Dr. Artur Polechshuk

"You can imagine how three physicians are crucial [to] health care for this small community," she said. "It's patients who will have delays. And doctors who are already there, they will work more."

After weeks of waiting, the couple finally managed to obtain an appointment for a visa interview next week. The Trump administration has directed U.S. embassies and consulates to review applicants' online presences, including social media activity, for any signs of hostility toward the U.S., support for antisemitic harassment or advocacy for foreign terrorist groups. Polechshuk said they have nothing to hide in their social media profiles, which are already public, but they're nervous about how the interview will go.

"Due to these new rules, we don't know what they will ask," he said. "When you are in a really stressful situation, you fear to be in this small percentage of people who were declined."

International doctors are often matched with hospitals in underserved communities in part because the positions are less coveted by U.S. applicants. But many international doctors also bring a unique skillset to neighborhoods — they speak languages other than English and may be familiar with diseases that aren't common in the U.S.

Training in the U.S. can also benefit populations abroad. Dr. Gabriel Pena, a family medicine doctor from Venezuela who was accepted to a residency program in Chino, California, said he plans to use his training in the U.S. to treat people in his home country.



Dr. Gabriel Pena, a family medicine doctor from Venezuela. Courtesy Dr. Gabriel Pena

"In the states, you put a lot of resources toward research, towards finding new treatments to help others," Pena said. "You guys have a lot of tools that I'm sure in the future I will be able to use back there in my country."

Like many of his colleagues, Pena is struggling to obtain a visa because of the travel ban. The secretary of state or the secretary of homeland security can grant exceptions on a case-by-case basis for individuals whose stays in the U.S. serve the national interest. But the State Department said it expects “such exceptions to be very rare.”

Dr. Conrad Fischer, residency program director at One Brooklyn Health, a hospital network in New York, said the visa ban could make it harder to attract talented doctors to residency programs next year. Applications open in September.

“We need the help of people who are making these decisions at the State Department and other places to understand the full impacts of the policies,” Fischer said.

CORRECTION (June 24, 2025, 7:50 p.m. ET): A photo caption on a previous version of this article misstated the location of a hospital. It is in Joplin, Missouri, not Joplin, Mississippi.

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